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ABSTRACT

Writing is a methodology for learning and for disseminating that learning. It is the primary methodology for learning in the humanities. However, for many people both inside and outside the discipline of English, writing is something less--a skill to be taught and kept separate from "English" or the humanities. To legitimize writing as a humanist study and to reassert its logical connection with the entire English program, it is necessary for the profession to find, in William Irmscher's words, a "comfortable identity" for the composition teacher that depends on making use of literary and critical values in continuing research in composition. To this end, members of the profession need to address the following questions: (1) What is writing as humanities? (2) Should writing programs and centers be English department programs? and (3) What specific practices of writing centers suggest this humanities emphasis? (FL)

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Abstract

Writing as Skills, Fine Arts, or Humanities: Implications for the Writing Center

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Writing is a methodology, a methodology for learning and disseminating that learning. It is the primary methodology for learning in the humanities. While these things may seem self-evident, it is clear that many people both inside and outside the discipline of English, really see writing as something else. We need to maintain ourselves and project to others this definition of writing as humanities methodology.

A case can be made that while scientists and professionals use writing, humanists are writers by definition. The more clearly we understand this, the better we will become at helping students become better writers in college.

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Writing as Skills, Fine Arts, or Humanities: Implications for the Writing Center

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Let me begin with three little stories, stories that feature revealing one-liners. They will perhaps seem unrelated; my job will then be to draw some useful connections.

Story A. Last year, our department was fortunate in hiring a young PhD from Ohio State, one of the few schools that has a significant graduate program in composition. While his dissertation was literary, much of his work was in the composition program and much of his time spent in the Writing Center. He tells me of a split, a tension between the composition-centered and the literary-centered graduate students. As example he recalls a friend of his, a composition student, who constantly referred to "that lit shit."

That's unfortunate, but you must admire the phrase. It captures the frustration of a student committed to teaching writing, yet sensing the low caste he's assigned himself to. He seems to know, and reflect in his diction, that he has become one of the hardhats of the English business.

Story B. A women's artistry conference on our campus this fall features readings by Mary Oliver, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet. There are also panels of scholars and critics. A grant helping fund this conference comes from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, the state program of the National Endowment. It seems the Committee will fund the area scholars and critics, but not Mary Oliver. To them,

her reading is "art," not "humanities," or, as the conference director put it, "If you do it, they won't give you anything; if you talk about it, they will."

The director's perception is accurate. As a four year member of that group, I well remember how often we wrestled with the distinctions between arts and humanities. Humanists, more than any other group I'm aware of, spend their time attempting self-definition. And, as a committed member of that species, I have been over that road a great deal. The distinction between "do it" and "talk about it" is as good as any I've heard, despite, or perhaps because of, the implications.

As something of an aside, I must admit to darkly comic speculations about the meetings that will occur when the post-structuralist critics start showing up on the humanities committees. How will those who believe criticism to be only a continuation of the literary text, and not inherently different from that text, be able to tell the difference between art and humanities? The confrontations between those who know the difference and those who contend there is none should be nothing short of spectacular.

Laying future pleasures aside, I return to the task of making connections between the graduate student in composition and rhetoric who talks about "that lit shit" and the conference director who has realized the distinction between "do it" and "talk about it."

First, the anti-literary student. He seems to have fallen victim to the hierarchical model of English that existing departments and their faculties consciously and unconsciously project. While we all generally understand this model, I believe there are a few subtle distinctions worth mention.

In this model, literary artists, primarily dead ones, are at the

top. Living artists, to qualify, must live a long way away, preferably to the East. Critics and teachers of literature are next. Those who teach writing are at the bottom.

While this appears to be a three-rung ladder, an arrangement of deities, free men, and slaves, it is not. In actuality, it's only two: free men and slaves. The deities aren't there. They're only on paper, pure abstractions. Note that in most institutions, faculty publications in fiction or poetry don't really count in matters of promotion, tenure, and even hiring. The local artist can't be a deity; he must identify with one of the other two groups.

So, when our young scholar says "that lit shit," I suspect he means the free men, the critics and teachers of literature, and not the objects of their scholarship. He very likely admires the deities, though his personal gods are more likely to be Studs Terkel or Tillie Olsen than Edmund Spenser. The object of his hostility is what he understands to be an exclusive club of more-or-less elite folks who avoid and demean composition teaching and, when they do work, parasitically suck the life out of what really counts: art.

I sympathize with this young man. I understand the politics, the ideals, the experiences that get him to the position he has taken. But he is wrong. And, when he gets to the writing center, or directs one, as he most surely will, he will take with him some cumbersome baggage.

Our second character is the women's artistry conference director. She, like the graduate student, has understood the difference between art and humanities and arranged them in a high-low order. Implicit in her "do it" versus "talk about it" distinction is a put-down of the humanist, an affirmation of the deities-over-freemen distinction on the three-rung ladder.

The most remarkable similarity between these two characters is that they both bash the literary humanists as if they are of a different party. Yet they aren't. Both these people have, or will have, the PhD in English. They are, almost by definition, literary humanists. From this humanist's point of view, the enemy is clearly within.

Story C. introduces a third character, this one not a humanist. This character directs a college learning center that offers student tutors for all curricular areas. The tutors are all trained together in tutor ethics and in some psychological counseling models. I asked if the "English" tutors were given training in composition. "No," I was told, "a careful selection takes care of that. They sure do know their English." This remark was, I'm certain, intended to flatter, to praise the good work we do in the composition classes. But that's not what I hear. What I hear is a low-level reflection of what we might call the "skills" mentality. When the learning skills director says "English," she essentially means editing skills. When some people in English departments say "composition" they mean the same thing. That partially explains why we are willing to fill our composition classrooms with instructors of limited training and experience and, at the same time, concern ourselves almost exclusively with literary specialities in hiring new tenure-track faculty. Outside the discipline of English, as we are all aware, this "skills" definition of composition prevails. It is common, as well, within the discipline.

Now, let me return to connecting these stories. All three of these people either do run or are likely to run writing centers. One is training to work in writing programs, one runs a program that includes writing center functions, one is a young English PhD who, in promoting a conference featuring writers and writing could well be tapped as a

writing program director when her institution is looking to fill that role. And, to my eye at least, none of the three view writing as, essentially, an activity of the humanites. That's too bad. I think that writing programs and writing centers must keep that definition in mind.

This is, of course, not a new idea. But I began with my little stories to demonstrate that the idea is not the prevailing one, that many who run writing centers really don't see it as a humanist enterprise.

Several questions come to mind. What is writing as humanites? Should writing programs and centers be English department programs? What specific practices of writing centers suggest this humanities emphasis?

First, writing as humanities. When William Bennett took over NEH, he added a process definition for the humanities to the existing list of academic disciplines normally included in the humanities. While Bennett's intent may have been to move NEH away from social activism and toward traditional scholarship, I think it helps everyone to think of humanists in terms of what they do. In simple form, the process of the humanities is to study a text, interpret it in writing, debate the interpretation, also in writing, and, if one is to really succeed, achieve a consensus about that interpretation or even offer a new paradigm for interpretation itself. This definition shows us the centrality of writing as a humanist activity and something of what the purposes and expectations are.

This kind of defining also clarifies what scientists do and what professionals do if you construct parallel processes for their work. The notion of text is redefined, interpretation may become mathematical,

replication may substitute for debate, consensus may take on a higher priority. These modifications all have implications for the kinds of writing done by scientists or professionals. This process definition underscores where their purposes and expectations differ from and are similar to those of the humanists. People who teach writing on a campus-wide basis must understand the different roles writing plays in different disciplines.

I think a case can be made that while scientists and professionals use writing, humanists are writers by definition. The more clearly we understand this, the better we will become at helping students become better writers in college.

Question two: should writing centers be English programs? While there are good arguments for free-standing writing programs and centers, while there are good free-standing writing programs and centers, and while there are many campuses where the politics of the three-rung ladder may be intolerable, I still think that English departments are a logical place for such programs. What I have been arguing to this point suggests the ideal place for a writing center and program would be in a humanities department or school. I don't know of any identified as such.

Question three: what are the specific activities and practices of humanities-focused writing centers? Obviously, tutors should learn the humanities-as-process definition as part of their training. They should learn, or at least have available, something of the expectations of particular kinds of writing in non-humanities disciplines. When the chemistry major wants help with an abstract, the tutor should know that passive voice is obligatory and persona is out. In addition to such training, tutors should be encouraged as writers (i.e.,humanists) as

well as tutors, using other tutors and the center director as readers and responders, or even debators. The senior, writing about epiphany in the plays of David Mamet, is gaining equipment to deal with the freshman struggling with gun control. The notion of responding to a text, for example, clear with the senior, probably non-existent in the freshman's mind, may offer a way to begin.

In addition to tutorial help, the writing center should be a place to write. Computers for word-processing seem to me both natural and necessary.

The humanities-focused writing center should be at the eye of writing-across-the-curriculum activities. It has become something of a truism that English departments have perception liabilities in promoting such programs. But it is also clear that WAC programs must be based in good composition theory and practice. People with that training are in English departments. Therefore, English people will be around WAC programs regardless of where they are administratively housed. To deal with this strange negative legacy that English seems to have, it helps if English people see and promote themselves as humanities-based writers, not English teachers. College faculty understand that science people write differently than humanists, and that people in professional programs, management for example, play by yet another set of rules. They understand that any faculty member will regard writing in terms of his or her own discipline base. And they probably agree that the humanities are more writing-centered than the sciences and professions.

A decade ago, Richard Lloyd-Jones' President's address to the CCCC was called "A View from the Center." He argued that composition, as a part of English, held "a central position in scholarship." It was unifying, a "view from the center of how disciplines interact." In

advocating this writing-across-the-curriculum position before there was writing-across-the-curriculum, Lloyd-Jones also decried the "skills" or "basic" definition of writing. If we become teachers of basics, he wrote, we "deserve our basic position, our traditional place in the damp cellar of the house of intellect."

Some schools have tried to locate writing outside the academic enterprise. But a WAC initiative from a non-discipline learning-teaching center seems to imply shallowly that writing has the same kind of gimmickly usefulness in all disciplines. I don't think that is the case.

In an effort to reach and bring in all kinds of students, the writing center should develop and deliver presentations on specific kinds of writing to classes in all disciplines. The loose categories of writing in the humanities, the sciences, and the professions are good starting places for developing and introducing these presentations. It is good for students to understand that what is practice in one area is sometimes even contemptible in another, the passive-voiced abstract, for example, or the graphics-filled text that is intended to visually please. They need also to see that certain principles of good writing are common to all areas and that a writing center can help them with both generic and brand-name writing. Such presentations probably help faculty too see what is unique and common in the writing of their disciplines..

Writing is a methodology. It is a methodology for learning and for disseminating that learning. It is the primary methodology for learning in the humanities. While these things may seem to be self-evident, it is clear that many people, both inside and outside the discipline of English, really see writing as something else. We need to

maintain ourselves and project to others this definition of writing as humanities methodology.

Like the humanities generally, English departments specifically are going through a time of self-definition. Many, feeling that composition will never get a fair shake as a part of English departments, are calling for separation. Some schools have done that. In other places, writing instruction has been taken over by other disciplines, with a variety of rationales. There seems now, however, to be a counter movement aimed at legitimizing writing as a humanist study and reasserting its logical connection with literary studies and departments of English. William Irmscher, writing in the Feburary CCC, argues that a "comfortable identity" for the "composition profession" depends on making use of our "literary and critical values" in continuing research in composition. While the proceedings of this year's Ford Foundation and MLA conference on the future of the doctorate in English are not yet available, an informal report suggested similar discussion.

I like Irmscher's phrase "comfortable identity." I find the humanities to be that "comfortable identity" for the teaching and studying of composition in the academic world.

Works Cited

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